

***It's alright, Elvis***  
POEMS and NARRATIVE ESSAYS  
by D. T. Hutchings

for my granny, my very first editor biggest fan

## **- it's so loud here -**

don't listen to me. not even for a second. i might sound like i know what i'm talking about, but i don't and neither does anyone else. words just spill out of me, i guess, in the way that coffee never wants to stay in your mug & blood never wants to stay in your body. whatever that means.

i would be lying if i told you i had a plan. that is fact. when i wake tomorrow morning, my eyes still foggy with dreams, i will no more understand the day ahead of me than i do quantum physics. i will roll onto my side and batter my alarm clock, who screams only because i told it to, then roll back into place and try to steal a few more winks of peace in my kingdom of cotton & down. at least here the goal is clear, simple, reachable; rest until you need rest no longer, and then do it some more.

don't listen to me, king of drowsiness & missed opportunity, for i will lead you astray. i will fill your head with lies (two plus two equals nine, cheesecake is bad, you will be fine you will be fine you will be fine) and can offer you only the stuff of dreams. on the surface that dream stuff sounds nice, but wouldn't you rather have something of substance?

this is what i meant. this doesn't make sense, does it? it's like somebody left the water running in my head and i can't be bothered to turn it off. instead it flows from mind to mouth and into the eyes and ears of anyone that will give me the time of day.

just don't listen to me.

somebody please shut me up.

- bukowski -

somehow, on my second night back, i managed to get black out drunk again. i guess i don't really know what i expected to happen, because every time you go and visit my neighbors, you can't really avoid getting fucked up in one way or another. they're avid enthusiasts of all things party, from beer and hard liqueur to the finer things in life, weed, psychedelics and sometimes cocaine. it's becoming a regular thing for me to drink and smoke myself into obscurity, waking up mid-afternoon the next day with gaps in my memory and the understanding that i can only keep this up for so long. sometimes i can see a blurry kind of timeline, where i remember key points like little frames that lead up to where i found myself the next morning, but most often i remember finishing a drink, and after that it's just gone. it feels like when i finish those last drinks in my memory, i unplug my own brain. the trouble is, it's not always clear which drink is going to be the one to shut me down.

i've been pondering charles bukowski for a week or two now, thinking about what i've read about him and by him, what i've seen of him in the media and documentaries. the man was as horrendous a drunk as anyone ever has been. with the amount of alcohol he consumed, it's astounding that he lived to be seventy-three years old. i'm sure that he died just as drunk and angry and sad as he lived.

there's a theme here, for writers, that i've been seeing. some of the greatest names in literature, from hemingway to fitzgerald to bukowski to fucking stephen king, struggled with alcoholism. alcoholism, however, is really a symptom of a larger problem, a more prevalent theme for writers. mental illness, crippling and destructive, is the great thread that stitches us together, connecting us through time and space and death like some kind of great and grotesque quilt. i know it's possible to survive it. the great mr. king has, and he's done more than survive. the man has thrived in his recovery, and even after his near fatal accident he refused to fall into his illness again. it's that kind of strength that i push for. if you know me at all, you know that i idolize the man, and i want

so deeply to be even half as good as he is.

i also know that we are not all as strong as mr. king. woolf tried for so long, and she has my greatest respect for all that she achieved while staving off her demons. eventually, they caught up with her, and she could not hold on any longer. she walked out into the sea with rocks in her pockets, and she escaped it all.

i won't lie to you and say that i don't admire her for that as well. whatever it was, strength or weakness, exhaustion or final vigor, loss or an undeniable victory, it does not matter. she escaped it, even if she didn't survive it, she is free now. the same of course can be said for hemingway and plath. the only difference lies in their methods.

really what i'm getting at is i'm terrified. i am terrified that i am going to be fighting this for the rest of my life. i am terrified that i may not have the strength of mr. king. i'm terrified that i have no idea when the moment may come that i decide i can't keep pushing on and fighting the good fight. i find some comfort in their books, because at least for the time that i'm there with them we're not so alone. they live on in their work, and they welcome me into their minds with open arms. for that reason, i find i have difficulty not coming back to their books time after time.

the way i'm leading my life now, i have no idea where i'm going to end up. everything is growing and changing around me, and i'm doing my damndest to keep up with it. i keep falling into these nights that i don't remember, and i keep finding myself ready to fall into them again. i know that only i have the power to end the cycle, but i don't think i can.

i don't want to be like bukowski.

**- starstuff -**

how does the great sun rise  
only to stand alone in the sky  
and how does the moon shine  
in the wake of those long since departed  
for these questions  
i have no answer in truth  
but i must ask  
for what am i  
if not the same

**- constant -**

when i am but ash  
settled in an urn and  
waiting to be set into the wind  
i will love you still

**- mislaid -**

come to me  
and close the door behind you  
with zeal, now  
strip me of my woes  
as you will these clothes  
forget with me  
if only for a time  
that there is anything  
apart from this room  
this bed  
and these bodies

**- pilgrim -**  
how many miles will  
these soles tread before they find  
a home of their own

**- Jolly Green & Drum -**

He sat in the midsummer heat on his mother's porch, lost in THC fueled reflection. It was not unpleasant, he mused, looking out over the great sea of grass before him and watching it sway with the rhythm of a consistent breeze. It was spotted with trees, each coveting their own pocket of shade at their trunks. A small rock wall had been started not far from the porch long before he'd come, but it had yet to see completion. He thought the half built wall, sprawling out in a crooked L shape around the front of the house, gave the place character.

The house was in no need of added character, however. It sat small and a little run-down, like something out of a campy horror flick. The porch was stone and recessed, with a plywood roof held over it by tall and shabby posts. It had two large windows on its face, one for the living room and one for the bedroom. The living room window had a small table of plants in front of it, and inside on the windowsill were more. The bedroom window was always half open; an air conditioner, humming and drooling, hung lazily out of it.

He had taken to the house as soon as he saw it. That had been a month and change ago, and he was sad to know he wouldn't be here much longer. In spite of the home-sickness that had settled in him with haste, he would miss this place, and more than that he would miss his mother. He had grown tired of the ever-hungry insects and the inability to bathe adequately (there was no shower, only a tub, and that did not suit him well at all), but not his mom. She was no small distance away here in Oklahoma, and it had been nearly a year and a half since the last time they'd seen each other.

It was time to leave. He needed to, but he was afraid. He was afraid of missing his mother, and he was afraid of the looming reality he'd been so often told he was running away from.

Adulthood.

He needed to finish growing up, to hunt down a job and hold it for longer than six months, to become financially independent and secure. He had come here, in part, to find a summer job and squirrel away money to get him on back on his feet when he returned.

That hadn't gone well. He'd worked a few days building fence with some guys his age, but on the third day he slept in, and was consequently fired. Apart from that, he'd done little to nothing, though not for lack of trying.

Of course, the overwhelming reason he had come was to spend time with his mother, but the troubles of his heart had brought him here as well. He wouldn't deny it. Love and friendship had him twisted, and he thought that distance would cure it. In some ways it had, but in others he only found things more complicated than before.

The only thing he was certain of was his own uncertainty. He wanted something, but what that was he could not say. It had only been a few months since he turned twenty-one, but somehow he had spent almost seven years of his life in a pair of committed, long term relationships. He had virtually no idea who he was without some one else, and it drove him mad. And yet, there within him was a powerful desire for intimacy and companionship. But what kind of companion could he be? And did he really want to be one at all now? When his desire to return home was met, what desire would take it's place?

For the life of him, he didn't know, and that scared the shit out of him.

In the chair beside him was a bag of tobacco and a pack of rolling papers. He pinched a wad of tobacco from it's pouch, and fingered a paper from it's cardboard to roll a cigarette with. Each one he rolled since sitting down was more loose and bent than the last. Between his thoughts and the overwhelming presence of flies, he found it increasingly difficult to concentrate on the task. All things flying and buzzing had put him on edge since a few days ago, when a wasp landed on his nose and crawled inside, stinging him twice.

With his cigarette rolled and lit and resting between his lips, he pondered the way people always wanted something. It seemed to be the nature of humanity to never be satisfied. Once one desire is fulfilled, another one sprouts in it's stead. He supposed it was as much a blessing as a curse. What was life without striving for something? A walking death? He only wished it wasn't such torment.

In a few days, he would be home, and he would have to take everything head-on. He would "grow-up", if even such a thing was possible. He would make a life for himself, and pursue his next great desire, whatever that turned out to be. Until then he would sit on his mother's porch, smoking and thinking and losing himself in the beauty that is now.

- veranda -  
how simple it is  
nicotine and thunderclaps  
yet so very sweet

- lucidity -  
i laid under the  
sky and waited too long for  
a break in the clouds

**- Carnival & Keystone Lite -**

I guess it should figure then that when I heard my step-father was being taken off life support, I found myself in a bar with two fingers of Jack and a yearning to fuck myself into obscurity. The last words I ever spoke to him were over the phone, behind that shitty bar.

When things get rough, I need to drown myself in alcohol or pussy (both is good). Alright, maybe I don't need to, but it certainly makes things less difficult to deal with if I've got a burning in



my belly and I'm chin deep in someone sweet.

My mother had called to tell me about her decision while I was on the way to get guitar strings from a friend. She told me they'd had to take his legs at the knees, that they'd taken his stomach out, and that his lungs weren't functioning without machines. She told me also that she knew he wouldn't want to live like that, and I believed her.

I hurried off the side of the road to somewhere traffic wouldn't impair my hearing. The bar was a 24 hour joint, but it was nearing three in the afternoon and there weren't many people there, so I took refuge next to a dumpster and a chain link fence in the back parking lot.

There was little to no brain activity, she told me, but when I asked her to hold the phone up to his ear anyway, she did. I said what I could, what I needed to, and then I told her that I had to go. I didn't tell her it was because I had a date with Jack Daniels that I really couldn't miss.

Death has never played much of a part in my life. I've never known anybody to die before Hank. I mean, nobody that I really cared about.

That's nice of me, right?

I could talk about all kinds of pain, all kinds of sadness and anger and joy, and I could do it for days. I didn't write the book on that shit, but I could give you one hell of an essay on it. Loss was something I was completely unprepared for, though,

I was alone for a couple hours after the phone call. Once I'd had my fill at the bar, I made my way back home to hide away in my cave. It was safe in my cave, my room, and I could drown the world out with shitty pop tunes until I felt like I could breathe again.

Reggie, the friend who had strings for me, sent me a few text messages trying to figure out where the fuck I was. I tried to ignore it, but she called me. After three or four rings, I gave in and I answered. Of course, she heard that something was wrong in my voice. She told me she was on her way to my apartment.

We've got something of an interesting relationship. I'm seeing her, I guess, and I say 'seeing'

because I don't really know how else to define it. I'm not sure I want to. We've been friends years and years. We fuck from time to time. Things are good, and that's all I really need.

Reggie didn't knock because she didn't have to. She knew about the spare key and where it was hidden, and so she came inside and found me in my room. She held me and I cried. I cried because it hurt, but also because I felt like it should hurt more. I cried because in spite of everything, I still wanted her to tear my clothes off and touch me. I wanted her to kiss me until the only thing I could think about was her lips , and then I wanted her to kiss me more, and I couldn't have been more disgusted with myself. Hank had was gone, and all I could think about was how good it would feel to be inside her.

She didn't kiss me. She didn't fuck me. She just held me, and then she coaxed me out of my little cave to smoke a bowl or four on the couch. It wasn't what I wanted, but it was probably what I needed.

**- atomic -**

the world is ending  
we'll have each other always

**- fervor -**

would that you lingered here  
as your scent on my bed  
which does so intoxicate me  
as your nails on my skin  
and the comet tails they left  
as your taste on these lips  
these lips  
i could never call them mine  
for they are useless  
without the contour of your body  
and all that lies within

**- for the record -**

the thing that  
above everything else  
makes you burn inside  
makes you shake and breath heavy  
the thing that keeps you  
waking walking waiting  
and let's you feel okay  
just for a while  
but always

i don't want to say that  
you are that thing to me  
but when my eyes grow weary  
of all the faces  
and my chest is heavy  
with mortal fears  
i need only think of you

with the lights dimmed  
you slept in my arms  
and laid me low with your serenity  
how anyone could settle  
the rattling of my bones  
so effortlessly  
i will never know

i think on moments like these  
and i can say for certain  
two things  
the first is that i can't picture  
this life with all it's color and joy  
without your tenderness  
and ferocity in it  
the second is that  
you strike something in me  
a startling and brutal  
hunger  
for life and love and  
everything in between

**- but would i dream? -**

it's like i woke up in this forest, right, and i can't remember how i got here.

it's dark and it's cold and i'm hungry.

i don't want to be here, so i'm trying to find my way back, but between the perpetually thickening fog

and the trees, i'm not sure i will ever find my way out.

the trees, yes, because i don't think they want me to leave.

they trip me with their roots.

they run me in circles.

no, they want to keep me.

i'm not sure how long i can keep this up.

i'm starting to see the appeal of going back to sleep.

**- splatter -**

perhaps i have been unclear

i want you no more than

the pines want sun beams

and rain

no more than i want

the air in my lungs

and the blood in my veins

i want you no more than I want

to write another

f u c k i n g

poem in hope

that maybe

you will read it

and maybe

i can sleep tonight

no

i do not want you

**- Moby Dick -**

I had this beautiful vision in my mind of us together at the time, just holding one another to cope with the terrible feeling of losing control. We whispered to each other sweet and simple things, and only we knew what it meant to truly have someone.

I held on to that for much too long.

**- check out -**

keep in mind always

you are but a visitor

and soon you must go

**- inside thoughts #1 -**

Retching over the one functioning toilet in the men's room at Target, I can think only of two things -

1. How can I vomit when there is nothing in my stomach?
2. Why don't I care about the two men waiting (impatiently) for this piece of porcelain, or that they are hearing the horrible sounds I'm making?

For my first question, the answer is simple. Bile.

Oh. And like half a cup of coffee I guess.

As for my second, there is only so much pride one can retain whilst gagging and slow-drooling into a space that has seen more shit and balls than anything ever should. Also you could say that by this point in my life, I've gotten used to vomiting in unfamiliar toilets with a host of people eagerly waiting for me to finish.

I'm not certain if it's the Newport I'd just bummed & smoked or if I am actually sick, but I guess that part doesn't matter. Sometimes smoking makes me gag a little, when it's getting down close to the filter. Particularly smoking a menthol. Anyway, it takes me a good three heaves before anything comes up, and even then it's not much. I won't say I tried not to look – you have to check the stuff that comes out of your body (what if there's blood?) - because I did and it wasn't very beautiful. It was just green and brown kind of, not red (high five).

A moment goes by and I just sit there, collecting myself. Breathing is good. I grab some toilet paper and wipe my mouth, toss it in the shitter with my bile & coffee cocktail, then flush. Hail Mary, full of grace, good riddance & get gone, Amen.

The walk out of the stall and to the sink I spend with my eyes on the floor. The man in the front of the line pushes past me and shuts the stall door with a bang. Click, locked. The other man says

nothing, tapping his toes and leaning on the far end of the sink. There is silence for a moment, and then the man in the stall grunts and there are some unpleasant plopping sounds. I wash my hands and face, fix my jacket and hair in the mirror, and then leave.

Outside, I know, it's raining hard. It was raining when I got here and it'll be raining when I get home. With my luck, it'll stop once I'm through the front door, but who gives a shit at that point?

People are coming in the doors like wet dogs, shaking themselves off and wiping their feet. There's a beautiful moment when they step through the threshold and the warm air blowing from the vents above hits them. They close their eyes, bask in it, and just for a second they are completely fulfilled, if not still a little damp. And just like that it's over and they are off to buy their sweaters and bath-salts and coffee filters and nobody cares about anything again.

I'm not saying I'm any better than that, really, I'm not. I'm just going out instead of coming in and it's hard to be anything but bothered by it.

I'm about to leave, but first I've got to make sure I've got everything -

pat pat wallet

pat pat lighter

pat pat cellphone

check check

triple check

- and even thought it's only four days into December, Elvis is crooning from the speakers above about how bummed he'll be without me this Christmas. I offer my condolences (it's alright, elvis) and head out into the puddles and shitty drivers that make Portland the place it is.

A thought comes to me as the cold air and fat drops of water hit my exposed skin; There is beauty in everything, you just have to let it confuse you.

I don't know what it means, but I figure I've got plenty of time to roll that one around while I'm out and about. I'd rather think on that than the time I just spent in the bathroom, or the sex I'd like to be

having but am most assuredly not, or the feelings of inadequacy that are bubbling up and spilling out of me like oatmeal cooked too long in the microwave, or the other feelings that are confusing and hard to talk about that maybe could qualify as ‘love’ (maybe not who knows) that I’m feeling for all the wrong people (and I do mean people, more than one, more than two because what am I if not a greedy child with my fingers in too many pies).

Maybe I’ll get lost in trying to figure it out, but probably I’ll just forget about it in a minute or two and be right back into all of this stupid shit. I could get hit by a truck and something tells me even that wouldn’t keep me from thinking about when she straddled me and pinned my hands above my head, how we just stared at each other, and how fucking glad I was that there was something (maybe blankets, maybe a pillow, some kind of buffer) between my crotch and hers because that may have been the hardest I’ve ever been in my life.

Of course this could have been anybody, but it wasn’t anybody. It was her, so let’s be honest, it was a dream come true. Half-true, at least, because she didn’t fuck my brains out or anything. It didn’t even last that long, but like the miserable wet fucks walking under the heating vents behind me, I was in a brief state of bliss, fulfillment, whatever.

There is beauty in everything, you just have to let it confuse you.

- apophenia -  
in the music and  
your eyes i found requital;  
i can’t trust myself



**- inside thoughts #2 -**

If our eyes are the windows to our souls, and I think they are, that means that you can really see a person just by making eye contact. And that person, in turn, can really see you. This is why even when the sun is blanketed by clouds, I wear sunglasses. I mean if the moon is out, or I'm inside, I don't wear them. But that's different.

I'm wearing a pair now, though soon I know I'll have to take them off. It's three in the afternoon and that means we've only got a couple hours of daylight left. For the most part, I prefer the fall/winter seasons to summer, but I do miss wearing my shades all damn day. The thing about it is, I don't want to be seen. At least, not by most people. I guess that's because I'm not really sure what's there to be seen.

I'm taking the the train out to North Portland, once again, busy as a bee (buzz buzz). There is this pizza joint out there that has been fucking me around for a few weeks now, and I guess I mean to finally set shit straight. When I say fucking me around I mean that almost a month ago, my drug dealer talked to his son about getting me a job there. His son then called me and we set up an interview. I'm not sure how many times since that initial visit I've been in (six, seven, eight?) to speak with the manager, but I've been through their skill assessment & training twice, filled out all of my new hire paperwork, and here I am still not on the fucking schedule.

So out again, chasing the ever elusive state of financial stability. I'm scared and I'm not sure what I'm going to do if they don't get me working soon. God knows I'm trying to pull it together. If someone had told me four years ago that I would be banking on a job making shitty pizza at 21, I probably would have off'd myself. I don't really have that choice now, of course. I've got people who are depending on me to pull it together now, and stepping into traffic wouldn't do them any good.

And I guess you could say I don't really want to die anyway. I'm tired of the struggle, yeah, tired of falling down on my face, of feeling worthless & parasitic.

But I want to live.

I want to thrive.

There's still a ways to go before I hit my stop and get off, and I'm grateful for that. It's too fucking cold outside and the rain is back (unless you like being drenched nine months out of the year, stay away from Oregon) once again. My jacket is mostly water proof, in spite of it being as old as I am, but everything else is most assuredly not.

I'm thankful for the jacket anyhow. It was my dad's first father's day gift, and it's quality. Nice, durable leather. All the zippers and buttons work, even. The lining may be FUBAR but that's not a problem at all. I just wear a hoodie or something under it. Can't tell the difference.

What I'm saying is it's a good jacket. It has a level of sentimental value, but there's more to it than that. It makes me feel like someone else when I wear it. Confident, attractive, a little less like somebody people keep around to feel better about themselves. Not me. Someone new.

Maybe it's a bad thing that feeling like a different person has such a profoundly positive effect on me. Maybe I don't fucking care and I'll take what help I can get. This other person isn't anybody's second choice.

At the end of the day, I'll take the jacket off and be back to feeling like myself, but the day is not done yet and I don't have to think about that right now.

**- inside thoughts #3 -**

Today has been rough. Usually I've got some time between my ups and downs, like at least a fucking day, but I've been on every fucking part of the spectrum today. It's fucking exhausting and confusing and I hate it.

The only thing that's been consistent is my libido, which is just through the fucking roof. Even that's fucked because I can't tell if I need to be roughed up & beat to shit or if I need something sweet & gentle & slow-like. I mean, it doesn't really make a difference what I need right now because I think if somebody did actually touch me, I wouldn't be able to handle it. So where the fuck does that leave me? What am I supposed to do with myself?

I'm just hiding in my dark little cave. It's cool in here (i like to keep it a little chilly) and I'm shaking, but I don't know if it's because I'm cold or just fucked up. Probably it's both.

Winter is great and everything, I like it, I just wish it didn't take so long for me to warm up after I've been outside. It didn't used to be a problem. I used to have a lot more insulation (fat fat body fat) and that helped. It's gone now. First it came off because I was doing shit, walking & biking everywhere, then skating. It stayed off because I don't eat enough. Always blowing my money on stupid little shit and running out before the end of the month.

For the most part, anyway. Sometimes I just can't make myself do it. Food doesn't taste right, or it's just too much. Like the flavors overwhelm my taste buds and it almost hurts. Does that make sense? I don't know how to explain it any better than that.

Maybe I'd feel better with some company. Maybe that would just make it worse. It'd be so great if you here with me, just you & I in this room with only faerie lights to see each other by. Share your warmth with me and I will give you everything I have left. Or I would, if you would take it.

But you wouldn't.

That's why I still love you.

I can only hide here by myself for so long, so if you are coming (please) it has to be soon.

- **straitjacket** -  
am i out of my  
mind to think that you love me  
the way i love you

**- you know what they say about beggars -**

the whole idea was that we'd be casual, hollow, no big deal. it was supposed to be simple, right?

i don't miss you. i don't miss you. i don't miss you.

i know i wouldn't, but sometimes i like to pretend i would erase you from memories if it was possible. remember 'eternal sunshine...'? i always thought of you when i watched that flick. even before all this shit happened.

everywhere i go, i'm on watch. even in my own neighborhood, with cities and highways between us. there are a lot of people in town that i don't want to run into, but i'd pick any one of them over you. if i have to see you at all, i want to see you first. that way, i can disappear - hide away in my father's home until enough time has passed that i'm sure you've gone far from this place.

if i have it my way, you'll never set eyes on me again.

i don't miss you. i don't miss you. i don't miss you.

i still catch myself thinking about you though. at night, mostly, but anytime the weeknd comes on the radio, i'm back on that shitty old couch with your head between my legs. you were the first person to make me cum with their mouth. it's dark, and i know kyle is sleeping in the next room but i don't care. he's snoring anyway.

actually, the only thing i care about is feeling close to you. this isn't how i wanted it, though. i wanted to kiss you, i wanted to hold you, i wanted to fall asleep tangled in your arms and legs.

instead, i got head.

**- sorry, i'll do better next time -**  
probably the only time i feel  
righteous  
in my anger  
is when i'm the one  
it's pointed at.  
i think that's why i'm  
so good  
at being walked on.

**-divided-**

i'm losing my grip  
and i don't know how to tell you  
that i am so ashamed of myself  
but i would break the earth in two  
to be in your arms again  
because nowhere is home  
but with you

**- understanding -**

will i ever be comfortable again  
or  
am i going be hiding from my friends  
in the bathroom  
for the rest of my life  
i feel more like a war zone  
than a traveling home  
and i never used to lock my bedroom door  
so thanks for fucking that up

**- bad dog -**

he's your own private animal  
but i think he'll stop coming when you call  
he's a bad boy  
better tighten that leash  
and put his muzzle on  
before he bites the hand that feeds him

**-smoke break-**

a steady  
drain,  
words, no  
connection

to now  
asking again  
where is  
trust i am fearful,  
rules  
my tongue  
too little too  
late

heart  
at ease, as  
if nothing  
e v e n  
happened to  
be waiting in  
sunlight, it  
shines only for  
so long,  
afternoon  
dreamt you  
all away

is it the last day of spring  
chapped lips of another  
a goodbye kiss  
or the promise of summer  
if daisies are weeds  
what does  
that make me  
would that i was  
so beautiful  
in the shade in the breeze

i grow where I grow, please don't go

**- choking -**

Stripped of meat and tossed in the yard, chicken bones lay in wait for the dog to discover.

It was a mangy thing, half-blind and half-deaf. Old. It had been kicked as a pup. It hated feet, and would bite at toes that dared venture too close. It's name was Buddy first, then Clack, after the sound of it's nails on hardwood. Buddy was not much of a name for a dog.

Clack must have thought us all fools, stumbling around with our aluminum cans of poison, our little burning sticks of cancer. Should have, at least, but there were other things on his mind. The scent of cooking meat was thick in the air, carried this way and that by the late-spring breeze. Half-deaf, yes, half-blind, yes, but that nose! He could not escape that scent, so much like ash under fingernails and dead, sun-burnt skin that peels too easily.

The leash came off some time after things began to degrade among us. Clack worked his way through front yard and to the overturned lawn-chairs and sticky, half dried puddles of beer in the driveway. He was careful to avoid the footfalls of each lunatic party-goer, though I suspect it was mostly luck that lead him safely to the grill. They were too far gone to be cautious of little Clack, likely no one even noticed his presence as he weaved and panted by.

Sniffing and sniffing. The meat, Clack found, was no longer in the little black grill, though it did reek so pleasantly of fat, of flesh. No, sniff sniff, the meat was somewhere he could not reach. A table beside the grill, too tall to climb or to jump onto, that was where they had put it. There had to be more, though, he knew. He knew, and he persisted. Clack would eat.

In the small place between where the concrete of the driveway became dirt, a neighbors yard, was a fence. Chain-link. It was at the base of this fence that Clack found purchase. Not quite meat, no, but bones, still greasy and unbroken, with tads of skin clinging to the tops and bottoms. Unbroken, at least, until he had them in his jaws. They cracked so effortlessly, yielding sweet marrow and satisfaction for little old Clack.



The music had become too loud and the people too rowdy. Shoving, snarling, shouting, laughing, mad. Every one of them. I watched it all unfold from one of three still-standing lawn-chairs in the back corner of the driveway. It was broken, and my ass sagged through the busted seat of it, but I was far too consumed by intoxicants to mind. At that point, I had eaten very little, but unlike Clack, my belly was quite full. I could feel it sloshing about inside me, a grocery bag filled with warm water, tied from the hand-holds. It would spill soon, I could feel that too.

An image comes - the sardine-can office of my pizza-shop workplace. I'm sitting across from my manager, a polite Nepali man with a goatee and a gentle way of speaking. He's saying a lot, reassuring things about my character, about what a good employee I'd been, how he'll be an excellent reference. He's saying a lot of things, and I'm smiling and nodding and definitely not pulling the hairs out of my arm one by one by one.

Clack's human, an equally mangy and old creature, sat to my left. There was a table between us, round and lower to the ground than the table where the sausages and beef patties resided. On it, half a pack of cigarettes with a lighter tucked inside, mine, an intricate piece of glass with a nail used for smoking butane hash oil, and a torch. The torch was lit, heating the nail. When the metal was red, Clack's human yakked at me – “All aboard, we're headed for Dab City” – and passed me the piece with a short, bent bit of a wire coat-hanger. A fat ball of oil rested on the wire's tip. I touched the end of the wire to the nail and inhaled deeply, twirling it between my fingers.

It was like fog, rolling through the glass and into my lungs. I took it all in one breath, set the piece on the table.

Too much. Too much. Too much.

I exhaled.

With effort, I rose from my busted plastic throne. One foot after the other, up the flight of stairs that lead into our host's home. Past the large spread of food on the kitchen table, Thai noodles in a glass dish, a big bowl of lime rice, potato chips, untouched cans of cola. Into the bathroom. Dark. The

window above the toilet was open, overlooking the driveway. My pants are pulled down below my testicles, I'm pissing and the seat was up thank god, someone's face came up against the screen – "GET A DICK!" - and the toilet whirred and hissed my urine down into the sewers.

It all unraveled. I swam through the house and back outside, back to my broken throne and the table with my smokes. My hands were too clumsy to work individually, but I smashed the little box of tobacco between them and started for the curb, away from it all. There was so much noise, noise because it wasn't sound, it wasn't words, it was racket. It came from every direction, crashing into my head like waves of broken glass. Belligerent faces, cheeks and ears and noses like sunset, faces I hadn't know four hours before, faces I didn't know then.

Why had I even come here? Why hadn't I left? Why did I chose this?

A slew of images at once - Ellie's bed, enormous, warm and entirely too far away. The text message I sent her before this got out of hand ("Hope your shift is going well!!!"). The marks on my calendar that represented my sobriety.

My ass met the curb and became well acquainted. My shirt had become unbuttoned some time ago, and I set to work fixing that with shaking hands. I gave up shortly after I'd begun, and instead tried to light a cigarette. I gave up on that too, left it hanging, unlit and crooked from the corner of my mouth.

Noise again, closer, from behind. More sweet than sickly. Not noise, words. Words, Jess. Before I could turn around, if I could turn at all, she was beside me. She took the lighter from my hands and it sparked to life. She cupped one hand around my cigarette and brought the flame to it. I inhaled, gratefully.

"Hey, buddy." She slurred, rubbing my back.

"Hey, buddy." The words lingered in smoke.

"How are you doing?"

I didn't want to look at her. Her eyes would be glossy, her mouth hanging open just barely, her

cheeks like overripe strawberries. She was drunk. We were all drunk. We all came here because we wanted to get drunk.

“Not great.”

“Are you gonna be sick?” She didn’t need to ask.

“I think so. I don’t want to.”

“It’s okay, honey. You can throw up if you need too. Ben’s already puked twice. You can throw up.”

Ben. Birthday Ben. It was Ben’s twenty-first. I didn’t even know him, and I was shitfaced on the curb outside his house, across from his neighbors and their little boy. The boy had been in the window earlier, watching us. I saw him, and I was ashamed.

“I don’t want to throw up here. He can see me.”

“Who can?”

“The kid. I don’t want him to see me puke.”

More words, but they blurred into nothing but rumbles, vibrations from Jess, from me. She stood up, grabbed me by the arm, and helped me to my feet. She was leading me somewhere, away from the driveway and the lunatics, who were throwing shit at each other, beer cans and rolls of tape and whatever else.

She brought me to the front side of the house. There was a mailbox in view, but the rest of the street was eaten up by bushes on either side of me. I was sitting on another set of stairs that led up to a veranda. Yes, this was the front of the house.

“I’m going to go get some water, okay? You can throw up here, no-one can see you. I’ll be back.” And with that, she left.

I wasted no time evacuating the contents of my stomach over the side of the steps. It didn’t seem to have an end. I would stop long enough to take in a few fat gasps of air, and then it would start again.

I stood there for an eternity, bent over the handrail of the steps, heaving and choking and spewing alcohol and stomach acid all over Ben's bushes. I was in and out of my body, my eyelids squeezed so tightly together I thought they might never come apart.

Get it out. Get it out. Get it out.

An image - Ellie's eyes, so much like a lake I had seen as a child, still and blue and gentle. They were deep, and I knew there was so much more there than I could see. I was terrified that she would be disappointed in me, that she would come home that night to find me sleeping off my drunk in her bed, and that she would ask her self - "Why did I think it would be any different?"

By the end of it, or what I hoped was the end, I was exhausted. I fell back onto the stairs, maybe a little too hard but it didn't hurt then and that was what mattered, and I lay my head back onto the porch. My eyes felt like they'd been coated in rubber cement, but I opened them to the clean, crisp night air. My view of the stars was partially obstructed by the house, leaning over me like a worried aunt, which was both unnerving and reassuring, but I could see a few. The sky was clear.

Another image - Jim's bedroom. His lips pursed, his teeth grinding, his eyes wide. He's sitting across from me at his desk. I'm on his bed. Quite suddenly, there's a knife in his hand. He's dragging it down his arm in swift vertical motions. Blood wells. I felt everything all over again, the panic, the rage, the pain, my voice erupting from my chest like a war horn. He stops, looks at me, drops the knife. Still, it's all coming out of me and I'm screaming at him. I want to shake him, to hold him, to cry, anything other than what I'm doing, but I just keep screaming.

Deep breaths. Deep breaths. Deep breaths.

Through the bushes, I could hear Jess finally coming back. She was laughing or talking or something with somebody else, but she was getting closer. I sat up slowly, hoping not to disturb the contents of my stomach again.

Jess rounded the bushes with another girl, Leah, who had come to the party with us. From the

look on Leah's face, I gathered that things hadn't gone well while I'd been vomiting.

"-something wrong with him? Do you think I should have stayed home tonight?" Leah asked.

"No, no, don't worry about him. He's just a drunk little jerk-baby." Jess said, shooting back the last of her beer and tossing the can into the bushes. "It's his birthday, and if he didn't want you to come he shouldn't have invited you." With that, she fixed her attention on me.

I stood up, bracing myself on the railing, and started down the steps. "Ready to go?"

"Yeah, are you feeling better?"

"Sort of." I chuckled, and I went to stand beside them.

Leah threw me a dizzy smile and started to talk to Jess again, but from around the house came Clack's human. She took note of this, and her face flared up with anger. Clack's human said something I couldn't make out, but it only seemed to make things worse.

My ears were failing me and my eyes wanted shut. It was taking every bit of strength I had to stand straight. My throat was raw and my lungs felt little and weak. I missed most of the conversation between them, but toward the end my urge to get home called my senses back to me.

"-fucking asshole!" Leah cursed, and Clack's Human laughed. Jess and I were trying to move things along, slowly making our way down the sidewalk, pulling Leah with us.

"Yeah, fuck you too. Get out of here." He stood with one hand on his hip, the other holding a long staff made from empty beer-cans and duct-tape.

"I hope your dog chokes!" She spat over her shoulder.

That's when things got a little different. Clack's human let go of his beer-staff, and pointed at Leah.

"How DARE you bring my dog into this!" He said to our backs. He followed us to the street corner, pointing, saying "I know who you are now! I know you! I know what kind of person YOU are!" As we crossed the street, he shouted after Jess and I and wished us well on our journey. He wished some other things for Leah.

The trip back was a blur. Twenty or thirty blocks. I remember the streetlights glaring down from above. I remember how quiet it was, how few cars there were out. I remember Jess and Leah talking, though of what I'm not sure. Finally, I remember the house, and how beautiful it looked at the end of the street, waiting on us to come inside, to be warm and safe.

I made for the bathroom as soon as the front door was open, paying no mind to Jess or her roommates in the living room. I closed the bathroom door, turned the light on, and fell to my knees in front of the toilet. After several solid heaves and splashes, I grabbed some toilet paper to dab my mouth with and gave it all a nice flush. I stood, moved to the sink and turned it on. I let the water run for a while and tried not to look at my reflection in mirror. I drank from the faucet with a cupped hand, turned it off, and left the bathroom.

There were a great deal of stairs between myself and Ellie's bedroom, but I made it. She still hadn't come home from work, but the window had been left open and so it was delightfully cool within. I shut her door behind me, stripped down to my boxer-briefs, and climbed into bed. I slept.

Clack slept too. He was sleeping the long sleep. His human found him sometime after we left, just before the police arrived. He had choked on a chicken bone swallowed too eagerly, but for those last moments before his passing, with the taste of marrow on his tongue and a sense of triumph over humanity, Clack was happy.

**- fragilefirefallingfading -**  
just the other night  
two stars fell before me  
and me, silly boy that i am,  
i shut my eyes so tightly,  
pursed my blistered lips,  
and wished for you.  
of everything i could want  
safety, sound mind, money  
a little tuxedo dog to keep me company,  
i wished for you

**- this is what i asked for -**

your words were a house fire, consuming every moment i had tucked away in the dresser  
drawers and empty closet space of my mind. it did not matter what seemed genuine, what i had  
questioned - all was eaten by the flame of five syllables, and the ashes that remained were carried off  
by an eager summer breeze.

**-silver and exact-**  
go to sleep  
i can feel the question  
burn behind those eyes  
he looks to me  
as if i were the ocean  
and that may be  
but my waters are  
u n c l e a n  
so seek sweet salvation  
somewhere else

**- It runs in the family -**

So I'm riding a train home, yeah?

We're about an hour into my trip, and a very enthusiastic man working in the dining car gets on the intercom and starts pitching food and shit. Sounds nice; I'm a little peckish.

I get up from my seat and make it all the way to the rear end of the train before I realize I went the wrong way. I was back there anyway, though, and I decided to look out the small window on the rear door. I watch the tracks and trees and fields we leave behind us for a while. They are quickly swallowed up by distance and replaced with different tracks and trees and fields, and it goes on like that. Makes me a little dizzy, even.

Eventually I find my way back to my seat, and from there I get to the dining car alright. It's very nice, lots of people just sitting and talking. There are huge windows and we are passing through a nifty little countryside. There is a gentle, natural light to the car cultivating a calm atmosphere, somewhat different from the rest of the train. I'm riding coach, and all the coach cars have a sleepy sort of blue feeling to them, I think. Still very much an environment you could feel comfortable in, but different.

A sign posted next to the stairwell informs me that food and beverages can be purchased below, and so I descend. The lower half of the car is much darker than I had imagined it would be, and there doesn't appear to be anyone seated down here. There could be, I note, looking at the booth type seats along the run of the car, with their little tables, but there are boxes stacked everywhere. There is some noise to my right, and I see a group of people huddled in a little room with stocked counters of snacks. I wait until the crowd clears before moving into the room myself. There were a few menus posted on the wall in the corridor, but they didn't have anything I wanted listed.



As I step into the cramped snackery, the man working the cash register takes note of me. I assume that this is the enthusiastic man from the intercom. “What can I do you for?” He asks, and I’m certain I’m right in my assumption.

I make like I’m looking about for something, and settle on a row of muffins. “How much for one of these?” I’m not sure why I asking - They do not look appetizing, and I have no intention of buying them. Honestly, I don’t care how much any of it costs. I’ve got thirty something in my bank account (big shot rich-boy over here), and I really doubt that anything is going to exceed that.

“Three-fifty.” He says.

“How about this?” I finger a king-size candy bar, which unfortunately appears to be the only size they carry.

“Two seventy-five.”

“And a can of soda?”

“Two-fitty.”

*motherfucking what*

Things are quiet and we both just look at each other for a second. I laugh, he laughs. It’s weird.

“Sorry,” I say through a grin, “I’m just being a dickhead.” I grab the candy and soda and place them on his tiny counter.

Without missing a beat, “Don’t apologize for being a dickhead!” he says. He grabs my things and scans them. “It’s in your nature! You come from a long line of dickheads!” He laughs, and I’m a bit taken aback.

“It’s funny how right you are. ” I say, pulling my debit card from my wallet.

He runs it with a smile and adds that he’s sure I’ll find someone equally as ‘dickheaded’ as I am, and that we’ll make each other miserable for the rest of our lives.

He laughs again.

I laugh again.

I take my things and leave, marveling at the curious interaction. I'm not particularly offended if we're being honest, but I wonder whether or not he talks like that with everyone. With my snacks in hand, I saunter back upstairs and to my seat to enjoy the rest of my trip home.

- but where? -  
our footprints  
at shores edge  
just long  
enough to feel  
our time  
meant something though  
the tide  
takes all eventually  
you are the only thing i fear more than the ocean  
each letter of your name  
is battery acid in my veins  
compelling me molecule by  
lonesome molecule  
to run

## **my mind is my delorean**

**1.**

the wind picks up  
and your secret doors  
rattle fierce but still  
you sleep in my arms

there is no rest for me tonight  
because i need to keep  
every moment  
tangled with you  
in the dark like this  
our fingers mingling on  
my chest, i am overcome  
when i am solemn for  
missing you i will come back  
to this night

**2.**

finding the good in all this:  
at least i knew you  
when the world was  
in your hands

the biggest mistake i ever made was letting myself fall in love with you. i don't know exactly when it happened, but i know that one day i woke up and found myself thinking of that sound you make - the one that's somewhere between a snort and a giggle - and the way your face screws up just seconds before you sneeze.

i should have figured i was done for when the best part of my day was finding that you had fallen asleep in my arms for the millionth time, and what is love but sitting through episode after episode i've already seen, all for you to catch up and promptly pass out again.

**3.**

because the closest  
i will ever get to your lips  
are the cigarettes we share

4.

i get stuck in thoughts of you, memories or fiction, but always stuck and always always you.  
i'm walking home, just walking home, not in your bedroom, not in your arms under your blankets  
sharing secrets & saliva & body heat & fuck, god, i can't just be walking home because i can

i can

f e e l

your breath

on my cheek

& your fingers laced with mine

i can feel you

but i have to stop.

i squeeze my eyes shut, grind my teeth, hum and bellow, and that works with most things.

it never works with you. i don't always want it to, but you shouldn't live in your head.

that's not normal

5.

no matter how well we reassure each other that it's not forever, saying goodbye is still saying  
goodbye.

a little might have trickled through as we shared lips and well wishes, but i did a good job  
holding the flood back until i got on the bus. you should be proud. after i paid my fare with quarters  
from your tip jar and found myself in the back of that crowded number 4 to saint johns, it all came  
crashing through like a sleeper wave to pull me under and out to sea.

i shook and choked. deep breath deep breath. the waters came down and i thanked whoever lost  
the aviators resting on my nose for their folly. the woman in the seat across from me looked over with  
her grey-green eyes and tacky blazer, perhaps debating whether or not to offer me comfort, or  
wondering what kind of adult cries on public transportation. probably she wasn't even aware of my  
existence and i'm just really good at making everything about me.

about last night: when i looked into your eyes, when i held your face in my hands, when i was  
so deeply in you that i thought i would never be one person again,

when i told you that it was only for you

i wasn't just talking about my dick.

6.

i convinced myself then that i if i didn't watch you drive away, if i turned my back to you as you climbed into the driver's seat and stuck your key in the ignition, i wouldn't have to miss you. after you had gone and i had so skillfully kept myself from peeking at your taillights, i found myself in bed. my pillow was still warm from you, your scent and stray hairs clinging to it as we had to each other just hours ago.

you split my lip. i lay there on my back, running my tongue over the damage you had done and staring at the textures of my ceiling. it would heal quickly if i let it be, it always did, but why bother? i was sure that someday soon you'd sink your teeth into me again, just as i was sure i should have watched you go.

**- what about jim? -**

it was roughly five in the morning when she started screaming.

i'm not sure what woke me initially, some thud from upstairs, or perhaps merely the instinct that something was wrong. it seemed like i had only just fallen asleep, but two hours had passed since i'd laid down on my little twin bed in the living room.

i never get much sleep anyhow.

quite suddenly, i was out of bed and climbing the stairs to the second floor of our home. apparently, whatever had pulled me from my slumber had roused my father as well. he stood at the top of the stairwell, and for a moment we stared at each other in a drowsy, confused silence. our moment was broken by a shriek from down the hall. my father turned, starting toward the source of the sound, my brother's locked door. i followed, stopping where he had been moments before, and i watched.

she was really screaming now. 'OW' she called out, 'what the fuck, OW!'

there was more, but i couldn't make it out. dad had joined in at this point, and his shouting bounced back down the hall to me, drowning out whatever was happening behind that door. there was a remarkable thud as he planted the sole of his foot against it, but no purchase. he reared his leg back again, and not knowing what else to do, i retreated back down the stairs.

in the living room again, two things occurred to me - the first, i was only wearing my underwear. the second, it was quite chilly. i grabbed an excessively large hoodie i'd kept from my XXL days and pulled it over my head. upstairs, dad landed the kick that would open my brother's door. the screaming continued, and i padded into the kitchen, throwing my hood up over my head.

even though jim's room was directly above the kitchen, i couldn't hear them that well anymore. i suspected that soon the three of them would make their way through the living room. i sat with my back against the oven and pulled my knees up against my chest, hiding myself within the safety and

darkness of my sweater.

i might have stayed there like that forever if she hadn't come down the stairs, gasping for air between sobs. i'd lost myself in the dark so deftly, but her feet pounding against the hardwood shook me back into reality. she wasted no time getting out the front door. for a moment, i wondered if she noticed my absence in the living room.

jim must have tried to follow her, because now i could hear my father's voice booming down the stairwell.

'you need to get control of yourself,' his tone was sharp, a slap in the face, 'do you want to go to jail? you need to calm the fuck down or the cops are going to come!'

a panic rose in me and i stood. i moved back into the living room, to the heap of clothing at the foot of my bed. i was in khakis and a red flannel before i knew it, groping about for the keys on my desk. i felt so queer there with the low light of dawn casting a purple hue over everything through our curtains, like i was just outside of my body, watching over the actions of some other man.

it wasn't so much walking as gliding that brought me barefoot out the front door. with the crisp air of that summer morning on my skin, i regained some semblance of control over myself. i'm not sure where i had intended to go, but somewhere in the time between getting dressed and stepping out, i had grabbed my phone and ear buds.

priorities.

by far, the hardest decision i've had to make in months was before me. i wanted so terribly to leave, and with the exception of shoes, i had everything i needed to do just that. my feet were hobbit tough, and the streets that made up my neighborhood were devoid of things like broken glass and hypodermic needles. i could have just walked away from it all and returned when i dust had settled.

but what about jim?

that question was enough reason to stay. i still needed to collect myself before i could go back inside, but i couldn't leave him. i sat down on our stoop, defeated and dreading what was to come, and i

put my earbuds in. hopefully, the music would put an end to the echoes of fear and pain and anger ringing in my ears.

**- see you when you wake up -**

Upstairs, a wall that was white once, made grubby by the hands of children and never washed as we grew. I pull a cigarette from behind my ear. A lighter click, a puff of smoke, a suppressed cough. I realize that every room in the house except for the master bedroom has also been stained by years of cigarette smoke. How many Clorox wipes would it take to fix this?

My grandmother spits green into a tissue, coughs some more. Grandmother asks for her blue shoes, in the pile beside her bed. Scoffs at a commercial for better fitting brassieres. I smile, grab the shoes and put them by the door for later. Grandmother got those shoes fifteen or sixteen years ago, she says. Bought a pair for my mother when she still lived with us. Grandmother remarks that my mother probably hasn't seen her pair in years. I nod, drag on the cigarette staining my fingers and teeth. I'm only half listening.

In the bottom of the bathtub, a few lines of anti-slip tape are coming loose. I pull them up. Better that than leave them. There is a shower chair in the corner by the door, covered with towels and a set of speakers that only work half the time. I shove all the shit off and put the chair in the tub.

Turn the cold water up, it's too hot. Turn the cold water down, it's too cold. It's back where it started, it's good. Grandmother shudders as I bring the water over her back. Grandmother is sorry that I have to see her like this. So sorry, she says. I rub shampoo into what's left of Grandmother's hair and hum AC/DC. It's nothin', Grandma. It's all okay, I'm gonna get behind your ears now, it's all okay. Wet sweater, wet jeans, wetter floor. I help her out of the shower, hold her up while she wraps herself with a towel. Grandmother doesn't think she will be able to do this alone again. That's okay, I say, I'm



here. Grandmother is ready for a nap. She stumbles a little on the way back to her room.

She gives me her dentures and I take them back to the bathroom. Run them under hot water first. Polident in the medicine cabinet, use one tablet. Soak in denture dish for three minutes with the tablet, scrub with little red brush, rinse under hot water again. When I was much younger, I asked my grandmother where old people kept their teeth. She cried.

Downstairs, a wall that was white once, made grubby by the hands of children and never washed as we grew. A lighter click, a bong rip, a suppressed cough. The clock on the wall closest to the front door tells me it's 3:33pm and I wonder who fixed it after daylight savings had begun.

**- worst case scenario -**

heat death  
of the universe  
volcanic eruptions  
black holes  
an asteroid on  
collision course  
and nuclear war  
it could all happen  
tomorrow  
and i'm still more  
afraid of losing you

**- take your time -**

pulling the hairs out of my head one by one was  
not fast enough,  
no, now by the clump because it's like i don't know you at all even though we've been  
runnnnnning  
on love and sex and sheer  
joy  
that two people can find each other and feel each other so powerfully as we do.  
i know you but i don't  
know the words that storm and smash together behind your eyes, and you tell me that's not my fault  
because you just can't  
pour it all out for me.

**- timberrrrrrrr -**

carving things into trees  
like initials and curse words is  
wrong. of this, i am certain,  
but i would carve our story  
into every tree  
in the state  
if it wasn't.  
we would stand together on  
oak and fir alike,  
at least as long as it took for them  
to be turned into paper.

**- Love Doesn't Rest -**

twenty minutes into our call, she started falling asleep. we'd been doing this a lot lately; we would call each other from under our respective blankets and talk until one of us gave in to sleep. with all the miles between us, it was the closest we could get to sharing a bed most nights. i don't think she ever thought we'd get to this point (i didn't), but now we're here and i don't think either of us wants to turn back.

i'd become an expert at predicting when she was going to pass out on me - the first thing that happens, she makes these short little "mm" sounds, like you might hear from someone slow-melting a piece of chocolate on their tongue. those only come a few times before what i call 'the great shuffling', a cacophony of skin and sheets and comforters shifting together as she finds a more suitable sleeping position. 'the shuffling' is followed, of course, by silence as she's whisked away into a softer, sweeter place than this.

she likes it when i just talk. says my voice is soothing. so i do - i just talk about everything from the stray cats that roam my neighborhood to the things the stars told me on my walk home from band practice. i talk about all of those things until she sleeps, and when she does, i talk more, say the things that i'm too scared to say when she's listening but that i think she needs to hear, like "i love you" and "i know you're afraid of the world and i know you're afraid of yourself, but nobody shines the way you do and they never will."

goodnight, sleep tight, don't let the bed bugs bite.